1995 Geo Data Forum:

Need for State and Local GIS Coordination Voiced

BY LISA WARNECKE

The use of geographic information (GI) and related technologies, such as geographic information systems (GIS), is growing in government and other sectors of society. However, as evidenced at the recent National Geo Data Forum, downsizing of the federal government, devolution of powers to the states and fiscal constraints all impact GI/GIS development and increase the importance of state and local governments in national efforts.

The forum was held May 7-10, 1995 in Crystal City, Virginia. It was held to solicit help and ideas for "partnerships to facilitate the development, evolution and use of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure" (NSDI). The forum was primarily organized by the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC), a federal interagency committee. It was also sponsored by various government and professional associations. Unlike most other federal GI/GIS meetings, forum organizers provided non-federal organizations, particularly state and local governments, with the opportunity to help design the meeting and address attendees.

Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, in his keynote speech, described the development of NSDI as the "ultimate democratic process" involving many sectors of society and individuals who have a "chance to create a reality." Babbitt has chaired the FGDC since 1993.

More Field-Level Participation Needed

FGDC's role in coordinating federal GI/GIS was strengthened when President Clinton signed Executive Order 12906 entitled *Coordinating Geographic Data Acquisition and Access* on April 11, 1994. Babbitt previously said, "my involvement is meant to send a signal that this administration is committed to developing NSDI." Since the secretary's appointment as FGDC chair, other members are also at higher levels within their agencies than previous FGDC representatives. However, criticism continues that FGDC focuses primarily on technical and natural resources issues, with limited attention to other data and policy issues. FGDC primarily involves federal agency representatives in the Washington, D.C. area, while there is a growing need for field-level coordination among federal, state and other organizations.

Up to 500 people attended one or more of the three forum days, which included a mix of plenary talks and concurrent sessions for sectors using GI/GIS. In addition, educational workshops on FGDC data activities preceded the general sessions. Presentations by attendees revealed increasing GI/GIS activities, a need for enhanced coordination, and willingness of many sectors and participants to work together. As found at most GI/GIS conferences today, networking was one of the most frequently stated benefits of attendance.

The forum followed an earlier meeting, the National Geo-Data Policy Forum, held in May, 1993. The majority of attendees at both meetings were from the federal government. The private sector was the second largest group and representatives of states, localities, utilities and academia also participated in both forums.

The 1993 forum was the first meeting sponsored by a federal organization to address both "national" and "policy" level GI/GIS issues and solicit input. While the 1995 forum provided more information about non-federal perspectives, the 1993 forum, with over 700 attendees, seemed more informative about federal activities.

For example, the first Forum included presentations about broad information policy and technology efforts. Speakers helped place NSDI and GI/GIS activities into a larger context in government. The 1993 forum speakers included Congressman George

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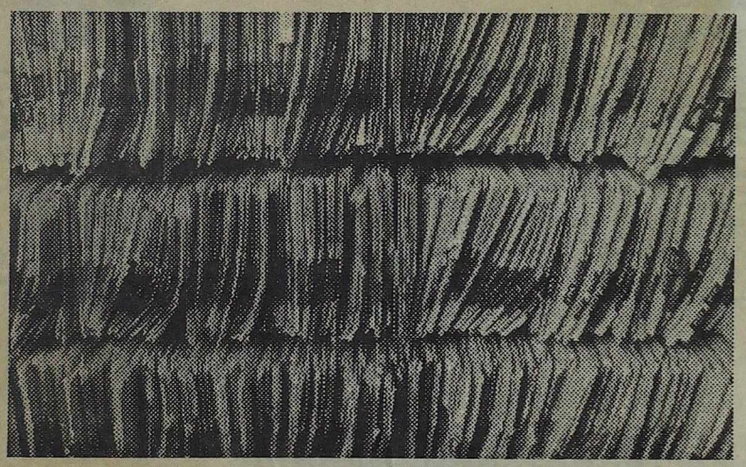

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Brown, Jr., D-Calif., then chair of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee. It also included presentations by representatives of the Office of Management and Budget, Office of Science and Technology Policy, General Accounting Office and Office of Technology Assessment.

Though without these presentations, 1995 attendees learned about some federal information policy efforts and non-federal participation in them. Jane S. Patterson, advisor to North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., was the leading forum speaker representing state governments. Chair of the North Carolina GI Coordinating Council, Patterson is also a member of the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIIAC), established by President Clinton in 1993. NIIAC includes state, local and other representatives, and officially advises the Information Infrastructure Task Force chaired by Department of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown.

A National GIS Council?

Patterson stated that the need for official state, local and other input is "more true for NSDI" than for some other federal information initiatives. She recommended that a national-level GI/GIS council be created which would include members from various sectors. The need for state and local membership in a national council is increasingly expressed by non-federal officials because FGDC is limited to only federal agency members, while needs for national coordination are growing. Unlike the Information Task Force, which is officially advised by NIIAC, FGDC only receives non-federal input through informal mechanisms and working groups for specific topical areas.

Providing further official state perspective to federal information activities, Patterson is also a member of the new State-Federal Technology Partnership Task Force. According to John H. Gibbons, assistant to the president for Science and Technology, this task force was created to help "strengthen the partnership between the federal government and the states" to maximize use of science and technology to meet many national goals. Patterson recently suggested to Secretary Babbitt that NSDI be used as one of the Task Force's examples of synergy and benefits between state and federal programs.

A later forum session provided leaders of various national groups with the opportunity to present their perspectives on institutional needs to further NSDI. William S. Holland, president of the National States Geographic Information Council, and executive director of the Wisconsin Land Information Board, supported Patterson's view. He stated that "partnership means shared investment, risk, management and return;" however, under current arrangements, non-federal entities are "limited partners" because they do not have a formal or management role regarding NSDI.

Sharing Responsibilities and Commitments

Larry Sugarbaker, chair of the Mapping Sciences Committee (MSC) of the National Research Council and GIS manager of the Washington Department of Natural Resources, stated that various agencies have "come to the table, but they haven't laid down their cards," something needed to meet NSDI goals. MSC stated in their 1994 report *Promoting the NSDI Through Partnerships* that cooperation among local, state and federal governments is essential for development of NSDI. Like Holland, the committee concluded that entities need to share responsibilities, commitment, benefits and control to maximize NSDI benefits.

Michael Goodchild, director of the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis, suggested that some partnerships exist today. However, he said the term "partnership" is too narrow, and efforts should focus on institutions and linkages needed in the long term. Goodchild is also a member of the MSC, which is currently soliciting ideas concerning NSDI in the future.

The forum included a half-day for representatives of similar organizations to meet together to identify common ideas, needs and perspectives which concern NSDI. These concurrent sessions were held for states, localities, federal agencies, academia, professional associations, utilities and the private sector. Members of each of these sectors provided presentations.

For example, mayors Ann Azari (Fort Collins, Colo.) and Ilene Lieberman (Lauderhill, Fla.) and others spoke at the local government session. Azari also chairs a Census 2000 advisory committee composed of various non-federal organizations. She suggested that more sophisticated public polices will be needed regarding GI, and particularly its use in local decision-making. Lieberman stated that localities are the primary collectors and developers of GI. She indicated that localities in particular require accurate data, such as addresses, and GI can then help eliminate data duplication and encourage data sharing.

What Plans Should Provide

Local government participants recommended that national plans should provide that (1) data be maintained by those who generate data, (2) tools be established to integrate diverse data sets, (3) guidelines be established for data and standards use, and (4) materials be developed to educate the public about GI/GIS.

These and the conclusions of other sector discussions were presented at the "town meeting" held on the last day of the forum. Federal participants suggested that securing of funding warrants top attention, including education of political leaders and budget staff. Another identified priority was increased focus on data and information issues, including strengthened linkages with general business and information resource management (IRM) activities. Consistent standards across sectors was also identified as an important need.

The forum ended with commentary by various participants. In particular, some local government people reminded attendees that localities are a leading data source and that federal agencies often ask localities for data. However, as stated by David Edwards, GIS manager of Clark County, Nevada, mechanisms do not exist to provide localities with data back from the federal government. Some participants, such as Donald Hoskins, state geologist of Pennsylvania, "sensed some confusion" in the audience, as some discussions were too complex for some attendees.

NSGIC's Holland proposed that a national council be established with members from various sectors to set direction for NSDI. FGDC is taking suggestions under advisement; however, no specific actions have been announced in response to the forum.

Federal officials need to consider the needs and perspectives of other sectors more seriously than ever before, particularly in response to increasing federal downsizing, devolution and fiscal constraints which impact many federal activities, including GI/GIS.

Lisa Warnecke is a principal of GeoManagement Associates, specializing in the policy and institutional aspects of geographic information systems, and is a frequent contributor to Government Imaging.

The Future of Spatial Data

The Mapping Sciences Committee (MSC) of the National Research Council is planning to conduct a study and workshop to assist in developing a vision of what the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) might entail in 15-20 years. Such a vision will be useful in developing long-term strategies and institutional arrangements to enhance NSDI in the future. The committee solicits input from readers on future spatial data needs and issues. Responses will be considered by the workshop and resulting report.

Some of the future questions to be addressed by the workshop include:

* Who will be responsible for the generation, stewardship, protection and quality of spatial data?
* What will be the societal demands on spatial data and will the driving forces be different?
* How might technological changes affect the NSDI, and is the NSDI flexible to these changes?
* What will be the roles of the private and public sectors in the NSDI, and how might they change in the future?
* What will be the role of education (and educational institutions) in the development of the NSDI?

Input to these and other related questions on the future development of NSDI should be sent to Dr. Tom Usselman of MSC: usselman@nas.edu or NAS/NRC, 2101 Constitution Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20418.

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